

CHAPTER 9

VENTURA COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

Within the past 3 years, Ventura County, California, has initiated reform efforts designed to move children through the CPS process more quickly while still providing quality services to children and families. Reforms included contracting out CPS hotline services, emphasizing early intervention and prevention services, and supporting staff in their roles as social workers rather than law enforcement investigators.

OVERVIEW OF CHILD PROTECTIVE SERVICES

California is a State-supervised, county-administered child welfare system. The Ventura County Human Services Agency (HSA) is responsible for CPS in Ventura County. The mission of HSA is to provide “equal access to appropriate services, treatment, and support to improve the quality of life in Ventura County by achieving equitable outcomes and promoting self-sufficiency, family unity, and community empowerment.” In Ventura County, CPS is administered by the Children and Family Services Department (CFS) of HSA, whose primary focus is on family preservation and child safety. Its mission is to “identify children at risk of abuse or neglect, intervene on their behalf and ensure that they have safe and permanent homes.”

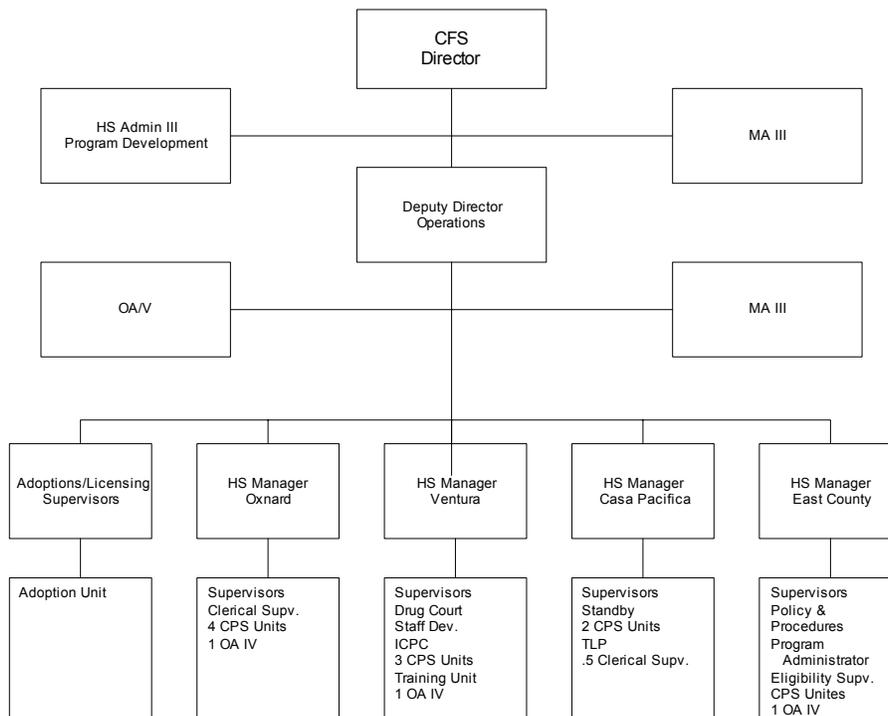
Exhibit 9.1, Services Continuum, graphically depicts the child protection decisionmaking process of CFS. As the flow chart illustrates, families came to the attention of CFS through Emergency Response (ER) referrals. This service was contracted out to a community-based organization called Interface Children, Family Services (Interface), which provides CPS hotline services, emergency response screening, and potential referrals to prevention services. Based on screening and risk assessment results by CFS social work staff, families are either referred to additional services that do not require court intervention or are scheduled for a court hearing. Juvenile court hearings are held in Superior Court to determine whether the child should remain with the parents under CFS supervision or be placed in foster care. The hearing may take place in Dependency Drug Court if it involves drug or alcohol exposed infants. Dependency Drug Court proceedings are held in the same courtroom and under the same judge as the other CFS dependency proceedings. Working with the same judge who is familiar with and has presided over both types of CFS proceedings is a benefit to the families. If it is decided to maintain the child with the family with agency support, a further determination is made as to whether family group decisionmaking should be considered. If the Dependency Drug Court agrees that an effort should be made to keep the child with the family, it assumes responsibility for ongoing jurisdiction and regular reviews. Whenever a child is involved with the system, concurrent planning occurs to prevent removal of the child from the family or reunify the family if the child was removed; and to arrange an alternative, permanent living situation for the child should the family be unable to provide care and assure the safety of the child.

ORGANIZATION OF THE CPS AGENCY

CFS is administered by a director, deputy director, and a team of four program managers, one at each site. A supervisor is in charge of licensing and adoptions. This group meets on a weekly basis to share information and make decisions regarding the daily operation and programmatic activities of the department.

Ventura County CFS is divided into four regions, each with more than one unit of social workers—Oxnard, Ventura, Casa Pacifica, and East County. Each of the regional offices maintains a CPS unit and is overseen by one of the four program managers. A supervisor oversees the adoption and licensing unit of CPS from the Ventura office. Exhibit 9.2, Organizational Chart, graphically depicts the organizational structure of CFS. The Dependency Drug Court and the Staff Development and Training supervisor have also been operated out of the Ventura office.

**Exhibit 9.2
Organizational Chart**



REFORM EFFORTS

Implementation of many CPS intervention and prevention programs in Ventura County stemmed from the commitment of the director and line staff to provide quality services to the children and families they serve. According to the program managers, the HSA

director and State Children and Family Services director were extremely successful at identifying the necessary funds for new and ongoing programs, while line staff shared an equal commitment to providing best practices to the children and families they serve.

Background of Reform Efforts

The initiatives described below were implemented within a relatively narrow window of time (2–6 months). This level of change within such a short timeframe created the potential for strain on both management and line staff. Management reported that the stresses associated with these changes were mitigated through strategies that included the appointment of a deputy director; the institution of a management team; and the use of structured, routine communication, and meeting protocols. The attitude of all management staff interviewed regarding the reforms and how the implementation was handled seemed quite positive.

In addition, California recently implemented its Statewide Automated Child Welfare Information System (SACWIS), called CWS/CMS. The implementation of CWS/CMS required adaptation to the County's needs and training of CPS workers on its proper use. Management reported that the transition was completed and the system's utilization was relatively stable. This allows for the preparation of monthly performance reports and the engagement of County Information Technology staff in providing other types of staff and client information for management purposes.

Objectives

The objectives of child protection reform in Ventura County are to fulfill the CFS mission by:

- Promoting prevention and early intervention services;
- Supporting line staff in their roles as social workers, as opposed to law enforcement agents; and
- Shifting practice to be more “family-centered” by focusing on keeping children safe in their homes and communities and by giving families a larger role in the decisionmaking process.

Practice Components

Ventura County CFS implemented the following efforts in order to fulfill the above reform objectives.

The Dependency Drug Court

Established during 2000 through a collaborative effort among CFS, the Superior Court, and the County Alcohol and Drug Programs and Public Health Services, the Dependency Drug Court assists women in Ventura County with newborns affected by alcohol and drug abuse. The goal of the Dependency Drug Court is to strengthen a family's ability to care for their children by providing them with early intervention services. In addition to the CFS staff, the Drug Court Team includes a public health nurse, the judge, a treatment home staff person, a behavioral health staff person, and a Cal Works social worker. The Dependency Drug Court provides intensive inpatient treatment and supervision for

mothers and their infants while they remain under the jurisdiction of the court system. The benefit of the program is swifter reunification of mothers with their infants, including placement of the babies with them in the treatment home. Mothers who successfully complete the Dependency Drug Court program are able to bypass CPS involvement and achieve reunification with their families while utilizing supportive services.

Interface Children Family Services Contract

Interface is designed as a comprehensive, integrated services agency that provides affordable prevention, intervention, and treatment services on a contractual basis to health and human services agencies in Ventura County. One of the services that Interface provides is the operation of the CPS 24-hour emergency hotline. Interface workers monitor the hotline and provide assistance and referrals to callers seeking CPS services or reporting child abuse or neglect. This makes it possible for screening to be completed with the oversight of a CPS program manager at a lower cost.

Additional CPS services that are provided by Interface include:

- Taking Care of Little Me, which is an interactive school-based personal safety and sexual abuse prevention program for children ages 3–9;
- Child Abuse Intervention and Prevention Services (CAIPS), which is a program developed to assist families in staying together while keeping children safe and free from abuse or neglect;
- Family Life Education, which provides parenting classes, offered in English and Spanish, designed to assist families during conflict and crisis;
- Family Support Workers, who are paraprofessionals trained to provide in-home education and support services to families at risk of, or experiencing, the trauma of abuse and neglect; and
- Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), who are court-appointed volunteers who mentor children involved with the legal system.

Family Decision Making (FDM)

This model is based on the belief that removing children from their homes may at times be as harmful to children as the maltreatment they experienced. A corollary principle underlying FDM is that families can be strengthened and empowered to make the best decision for the safety and protection of children by linking with community and government agency support systems while maintaining the child in the family network. In Ventura County, the development of FDM stemmed from the collaborative efforts of CPS front-line staff and the management team. At the prompting of line staff, FDM was developed as a voluntary process to bring CPS families together with their friends and service providers to make and fulfill decisions about the care and safety of their children.

Interagency Case Management Council (ICMC)

ICMC is a collaborative effort involving CPS and various county agencies that gather weekly to share information and resources and to develop a consensus plan. The goal is to develop alternative plans designed to prevent the removal of children and return children to their families as quickly as possible while also reducing risk factors.

Public Health Nurse Partnership

During the past year, the role of public health nurses was revised in Ventura County CFS. Originally, the county funded them to be onsite in the four CPS regional offices, but did not provide guidance about their roles and functions. Consequently, the nurses functioned as social workers. The new role of the public health nurses is to assist CPS line staff with any medical concerns, interpretation of medical terms, and followup services with children and families.

Multi-Disciplinary Interview Center (MDIC)

Also known as Safe Harbor, MDIC is a coalition of public and private agencies dedicated to serving women and children who have been victims of sexual and physical abuse. MDIC eases the interview processes for victims by providing a nonintimidating, victim friendly environment for forensic medical exams and interviews that meet the requirements of law enforcement, the courts, and CPS. MDIC also provides crisis intervention and referral services to victims to minimize trauma while maximizing criminal prosecution. MDIC is funded through grants, donations, and contracts from participating agencies.

Parent Leadership Task Force

The Parent Leadership Task Force was initiated during September 2002 to improve communication and reduce barriers between parents and CPS staff. Through the Parent Leadership Task Force, parents are able to voice their concerns in a confidential manner as well as share their stories of CPS involvement. Staff and parents are also able to collaborate on issues to allow for the most inclusive resolution possible.

Best Practice Council

The Best Practice Council is composed of CPS supervisors who work together in a proactive manner to develop best practice standards for the field of social work in Ventura County. Members of the council meet once a month to discuss risk assessment, effective services, community input, and measurable outcomes. In addition, members of the council work together to review systemic problems as well as make recommendations for change.

Opportunity For Improvement (OFI)

As an aspect of CFS's Quality Improvement Program, OFI addresses the identification and solution of internal organizational issues. The OFI process, introduced during 1999 by a consulting firm at the request of the previous deputy director, is staffed by members of the line staff and provides a formal mechanism for staff to develop and implement policy. Through OFI, new policies and changes to CPS practice have been identified, including the need for additional child car seats during ER investigations, the introduction of Family Decision Making, and increased avenues for improved communication between management and workers.

Results

The Ventura County CFS deputy director and program managers agreed that reform efforts resulted in families and staff better partnering in the decisionmaking process, as

well as opening doors to a broader array of linkages to community-based services. However, many of the above efforts were still relatively new and their effectiveness was still being assessed. Some of the client outcomes-related accomplishments have included:

- Only 5 percent of the children involved in 7,000 CPS referrals went into out-of-home placement; and
- Using data from their business object reports to track key performance indicators derived from CWS/CMS, the management team identified and targeted specific regions and units for management improvements. This tracking resulted in an increased screen-in rate, from 58 percent to 78 percent.

Since the implementation of CPS reform in Ventura County, the agency had been successful in retaining its line staff. The turnover rate of line staff has decreased to 4 percent, compared with 20 percent 2 years ago. Ventura County has accomplished a shift in organizational culture and employee satisfaction. For instance, relationships among management, line staff, and collaborative agencies have improved. Many workers indicated that they were able to express their opinions and communicate their ideas to management with the confidence that they would be heard. One example of a channel of communication was the CFS director's lunch program which was held on a weekly basis and called the "Socrates Café." The purpose of the lunch program was for interested staff to have time with the director to informally discuss issues and concerns they might have.

Line staff reported that staff supervision improved, information was more consistent, and performance accountability was measured better when data acquired from CWS/CMS was used. Workers indicated that, due to this innovation, they felt more empowered to perform the social work they were hired and trained to do.

As part of a Continuous Quality Review during the past year, management staff revised and clarified the role of the public health nurses at the CPS sites to be consistent with their professional training and functions. This change allows public health nurses to assist social workers with medical issues, help decipher and interpret medical information, and work with doctors during the CPS investigation processes. This change has resulted in the identification of previously overlooked medical problems, a decrease in the high turnover rate of nurses, and recognition of the need for additional nurses in the program.

There has also been a change associated with the Interagency Case Management Council. The ICMC was one of the pioneering efforts to coordinate the range of community services available in the county on behalf of maltreated children and their families. During recent years, however, its focus had shifted toward the identification of families and children for CPS services. The CFS director and deputy director took specific steps to reorient the council to its fundamental role of service coordination.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

This section describes factors that have contributed to the success of the reforms and outlines the future plans for the county with regards to continued reform efforts.

Conditions that Sustain Reform

Conditions identified as those that help to sustain the reforms were as follows:

Better Pay

According to the director, program managers, and line staff of Children and Family Services, employee retention will continue with the ongoing provision of better wages compared to other CPS agencies within California.

Training And Job Opportunities

The director, program managers, and workers also felt that ongoing training and support—through flexible work schedules, opportunities for advancement, monthly performance reviews, and job coaching as needed—will complement reform efforts.

Employee training currently includes a comprehensive program for both new and existing staff. New employees receive a 3-day introduction to the county, followed by 2 weeks of training with a specially selected caseload, and 6 months of intensive on-the-job CPS training. New employees continue to receive modified caseloads and have access to alternate work schedules, in addition to reviews by supervisors and mentoring by more experienced coworkers. All county employees are encouraged to further their education and knowledge base by enrolling in various staff development, leadership, and computer classes, such as those offered by Interface. Program managers have also been able to utilize data acquired from the CWS/CMS system to monitor worker performance and to provide assistance and additional training to staff with skills that might need to be enhanced or updated. Once hired, all social workers attend the California Academy of Social Work courses in addition to mandated core courses in leadership and customer service.

Future Plans

The future of CPS in Ventura County lies in the following activities:

- Continuous improvement of the speed with which families are moved through the CPS process;
 - Provision of increasingly family-friendly services and environments which support families in keeping children in their homes and communities rather than providing a family management system;
- Development of additional resources and better linkages to public, private, and community-based services; and
- Becoming accredited with the Council on Accreditation (COA).

SUMMARY

As noted above, reform efforts implemented by Ventura County CFS are too new for their effectiveness and systemic impact to have been adequately assessed. However, CFS staff, administration, and partners believe that they are improving services for children and families reported to CPS. The sentiments expressed by management and workers are that, while the current situation is not perfect, the organizational infrastructure and

leadership that are needed to manage change are in place. The recent changes were reported to be accompanied by a universal commitment by both program managers and line workers for the ongoing responsiveness of CPS practices.

